

“From the ‘Hood”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRode
The Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 5, 2009
Scripture: Mark 6:1-13

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Lord, you have called us into your service. You have enlisted us in your work. Grant us, we pray, that having called us and enlisted us, you will also give us the gifts and grace we need to serve you and to recognize and appreciate the gifts you have given to others. Amen.*

You remember, I’m sure, that just a few weeks ago we celebrated with our High School and College graduates. It was a great day for them and for those of us who are parents of the graduates. Now that school is out, though, and now that our graduates are home looking for jobs in this awful economic mess in which we find ourselves, it is not quite so exciting. Even those with good grades and special gifts and talents are finding it hard to be taken seriously by people. That may be especially true for those trying to find jobs in their home town.

I know that Thomas Wolfe said, “You can’t go home again”, but I tend to disagree with him. No matter how old you are or how long you have been away, you can go home. And it has been my experience that, while your parents may be older and a bit more dependent and your brothers and sisters may have grey hair, somehow the relationships you had with them remains the same. The child who was the favorite still is. The child who was comfortable just watching everyone else do the work still is. The child who was always expected to take care of everyone else still is.

And regardless of how old you are, or how much education you have, or how long you have been working in your field, you are still your parents’ child and the one the neighbors remember picking their flowers, or walking in their new cement, or leaving your bike in their front lawn. They are proud of what you have become, of where you have been and of the letters behind your name, but you are still just a child from the neighborhood or a kid from the ‘hood as the

kids say.

As I listen to Mark’s words to us this morning, I realize that Jesus is experiencing that same kind of thing. Mark tells us that Jesus had been about his difficult work – teaching, and healing and even raising people from the dead. He has developed a reputation, and people far and wide have clamored to be near him. The people in his home town were aware of all of that and weren’t really sure what to expect.

At first they listened to what he said. But then he started saying strange things about God loving sinners, and things like new wine can’t be stored in old wineskins, and that his real family consists of those who follow him. After a while they began to take offense at what he was saying. “Who does he think he is coming here and telling us these things? Haven’t we taught him everything he knows?”

The true downside of the Incarnation is limitation. And here in Jesus’ hometown Jesus was faced with the failure of familiarity. How could Jesus have anything profound or inspired to offer the people of Nazareth when they had seen him running down the streets with a droopy diaper? How could the “son of Mary,” one of apparently questionable parentage and no social standing, be a possible messiah? How could a “tekton” – a carpenter – a mere day laborer, claim any authority to speak God’s word with divine insight? Surely he must be delusional. After all, he is just a kid from the ‘hood.

I am sure you have all heard the axiom, “An expert is defined as “an ordinary person with a briefcase at least 50 miles away from home.” And I am sure that Jesus was aware of that tendency, as well. He knew the rumors of rejection – he knew that “familiarity breeds contempt.” But mostly he knew that Nazareth needed the word of God, and he needed to offer the face of God to them first. He longed to give back to them the words of repentance, the spirit of forgiveness, the face of truth, the gift of blessing.

But Nazareth could not hear. Nazareth was deafened by the din of familiarity. Jesus was a known entity. A common kid from the ‘hood. How could he have a new message to offer them? One of the hardest things in the world is to “know” the familiar.

Let’s think of our high school reunions. Imagine being in the high school class of Bill Gates.

We can’t do college because Gates was a Harvard drop-out. But if you had been at Bill Gates’ 10 year high school reunion, you would have talked to a hugely geeky guy, a wannabe working on some weirdo-ideas about some technological wizardry. The 10th Year Anniversary grade for Bill Gates: “Loser”.

But what about the 20th Anniversary of the Bill Gates high school reunion? Quite a different story – wasn’t it?! How about the richest man in the world? Worth billions. No longer a geek, but the “Microsoft Magnate.” Who’d a thunk it?

One of the most magnificent divine disclosures that Jesus could have ever given to humanity is today’s gospel text in Mark. Jesus is told by people he loves that he is just a no-count nobody, a kid from the ‘hood. He was utterly rejected by his community – not because of what he knows, but because of what they know about him.

New Testament scholars inform us that the problem here is one of culture: in an honor/shame society, it was an act of sheer arrogance for someone of Jesus’ lowly origins to speak out publicly. The villagers of Nazareth knew Jesus, and they thought him to be nothing special. His mother and siblings lived among them and they were just ordinary folk. Jesus was a journeyman carpenter at best, not a sage or dignitary, and his apparent ability to perform “deeds of power” like healings simply didn’t add up. So “they took offense at him.”

In fact, Mark tells us their unbelief seemed to work against Jesus’ power. “He could do no deed of power there.” (Well, Mark concedes, he slipped in a few random healings, but nothing like what all the shouting was about three verses earlier!) It was Jesus’ turn to be surprised. “He was amazed at their unbelief”, Mark says.

I will leave it to the systematic theologians to work out how Jesus’ abilities could be so limited. I will tell you, though, that just as much as people who seem to be “with me” during a sermon – those who smile and nod and pay attention – can give me energy and make my sermon better, those people who close their eyes, write their grocery lists, or fold their dollar bills for the offering take my energy away.

I don’t know if you are aware of it or not, but this month is the month we celebrate the 500th

anniversary of John Calvin's birth. John Calvin was the founder of the Protestant Reformation. Just as Lutherans adore Martin Luther, Methodist hearts are strangely warmed by John Wesley, and even Anglicans have a sort of sardonic fondness for Henry VIII, we, children of the reformation, should at least acknowledge the direction in which the Reformed Tradition has gone. While Calvin would have been pleased by our reluctance to revere him, it is important that we be aware of his influence on our denomination.

It was Calvin who taught us that we should not view the Bible as a collection of facts to be learned or propositions to be mastered. In one of his delightful images, he likens Scripture to a pair of eyeglasses: "Just as eyes, when dimmed with age or weakness or by some other defect, unless aided by spectacles, discern nothing distinctly: so such is our feebleness, unless Scripture guides us in seeking God, we are immediately confused." We study the Bible, not for its own sake, but because Scripture helps us to see God truthfully, ourselves honestly, and God's Way in the world more clearly.

It was also Calvin who said that one of the marks of true worship is that the "gospel be rightly preached and rightly heard" – which puts as much responsibility on you as it does on me.

We are all turned away by people we know – people who know us. We are all dismissed by people we love and people who we know love us. Our pie-crusts are doughy, our finances are flaky, our businesses our iffy. One of the most gracious gifts Jesus gave to his disciples – both the original twelve and all of us who strive to follow in their footsteps – is the knowledge that the people who know us best may be the least likely to respect us and accept our message.

Not everyone will receive you. Not every one will love you. Not everyone will appreciate you. But when you do fail – when you do fall – fall and fail forward. Failure is just a different word for a new beginning. And new beginnings are the first step towards a new life – a redeemed life.

When Jesus counseled his first disciples to "shake off the dust from their feet," they were being told to shake off their souls from those people and places that produced only negative energy – negative power. Not one of us can control the negative powers

of the universe. Not one of us can rebuff the negative powers of the universe. But, regardless of what we cannot control, we can decide what our own involvement in those powers and principalities will be. We can decide whether or not to participate in those powers which shape and shimmy about in our lives.

If you ask me, the purpose of today's gospel lesson is to remind us that deeds of power and love are deeds of power and love no matter who performs them. The purpose of today's gospel lesson is to remind us living as Jesus lived is deeply offensive to those who do not want to give up the benefits and privileges that accrue to them because of their skin color, their ethnicity, their nationality, their gender, their wealth, their intelligence or their sexual orientation.

We have the same choice before us that the people of Jesus' hometown had: we can ignore him or we can follow. Personally, I think that if we are going to give offense as he did so often, it is wiser and more faithful to offend by loving too much and welcoming too radically rather than loving too little and being too quick to shut our doors and our hearts. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

Thanks to Leonard Sweet for his sermon, "Nobody is too Big to Fail, Nobody is too Small to Prevail", "ideas! For Church Leaders, Fall 2008, USA Today, Monday, May 4, 2009", Andra La Sonde Anastos for her commentary on this passage in "The Clergy Journal" for March and April 2009.

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The First Presbyterian Church
of Dunedin
455 Scotland Street
Dunedin, Florida 34698
(727) 733-2318 fax (727) 738-4297
WEBSITE: fpcdunedin.org
E-mail:
officeadminfpc@tampabay.rr.com
Victoria ByRoade, Pastor